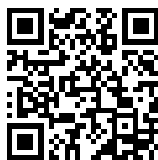

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Who Wrote Piers Plowman?

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Notes on Piers Plowman.

BY E. M. HOPKINS.

I.

Who Wrote Piers Plowman?

**Literature of
the poem.**

It may be said that when less is known of an author of standing, more is likely to be written about him. If this proposition be a true one, there must remain a great deal to be written in regard to the author of the "Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman;" first, because his work is of such acknowledged importance, and second, because his identity remains, after all efforts to determine it, an unsolved if not an unsolvable problem. Even as to the poem itself, although it has been termed a mine of wealth, the literature upon it evidences that the mine is as yet largely unworked. It is not surprising to find that editions of the poem are limited in number, especially after the appearance of the monumental one of Professor W. W. Skeat; but it is surprising to find the total number of other works devoted exclusively to the poem to be so small, many of them merely students' monographs of a few pages each. It is not, therefore, attempting the impossible to undertake with ordinary library facilities a general survey of them with reference to matters of record or in dispute.*

**List of
references.**

*For convenient reference in this and succeeding papers, a list of editions, and a list, tentative, but believed to be nearly complete, of works, monographs, and papers devoted exclusively to the poem, are here given. Works which mention the poem or treat of it incidentally, are of course very numerous, and no attempt is here made to tabulate them.

Manuscripts. A. In such a list as this, the *manuscripts* of the poem should have a place. Of these there are forty-five now known to be in existence; ten of the A-text, thirteen of the B-text, fifteen of the C-text, four of a mixed A- and C-text, and three of a mixed B- and C-text. One has been lost, and perhaps another; one, a B-text, was used by Crowley in preparing his edition of

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Such a survey is not likely to be fruitful of valuable results because practically all information touching poem and author must come from the work itself rather than from any outside source.

But the study of disputed points in literary history has a fascination all its own, as is shown in Professor Lounsbury's "Studies in Chaucer;" and though there are fewer such points to be noted in connection with the author of *Piers Plowman*, and though there is a minimum of evidence to base a discussion upon, there are nevertheless a few that are not unworthy of attention; and perhaps chief among these, because of

the poem; the other is simply mentioned by Crowley as seen and bearing date 1409. Still others may yet be discovered. Of these manuscripts the following are referred to in this paper:

- MS. Trinity College, Dublin, D. 4. I (C-text), Skeat's No. XLI.
- Ashburnham MS. No. 130 (B-text), No. XX, Skeat.
- Earl of Ilchester's MS. (O-text), No. XXXII, Skeat.
- MS. Douce 104, Bodleian Library (C-text), No. XXXVIII.
- MS. Digby 102, Bodleian Library (C-text), No. XXXIX.

B. *Printed editions of the poem.* (In citations, those of Skeat will be designated by the date of publication.)

1550. Robert Crowley. Three impressions in the same year; based principally upon a B-text, but showing that the editor had access to at least four MSS. and to all three texts. Includes the printer's address to the reader. The first edition is most carefully printed; the second and third contain an abstract of the poem.

1561. Owen Rogers. An unimportant and defective reprint of Crowley's third edition.

1813. Thomas Dunham Whitaker. Based on a C-text, now and then compared with two other MSS. Introduction, notes, and glossary.

1842. Thomas Wright. Based on B-text. Introduction, notes, and glossary.

1856. Thomas Wright. Second and revised edition.

1866. W. W. Skeat. Parallel Extracts from Twenty-nine MSS. (Early English Text Society.)

1867. W. W. Skeat. A-text. (Early English Text Society.)

1869. W. W. Skeat. B-text. (E. E. T. S.)

1869. W. W. Skeat. First part of B-text, for school use. Other editions of the same have appeared in 1874, 1879, 1886, 1888, 1891, and 1893.

1873. W. W. Skeat. C-text and Richard the Redeless. (E. E. T. S.)

1877. W. W. Skeat. Notes on the poem, section I. (E. E. T. S.)

1884. W. W. Skeat. Notes on the poem, section II. General preface and glossary. (E. E. T. S.)

1885. W. W. Skeat. Parallel Extracts from Forty-five MSS. (E. E. T. S.)

1886. W. W. Skeat. Three texts parallel, and Richard the Redeless. Introduction, notes, and glossary.

1893. W. W. Skeat. Seventh edition, revised, of the school text first published in 1869.

1895. Kate M. Warren. A prose translation of the first part of text B.

1896. J. F. Davis. First part of text B. For school use.

1898. Katharine Comans. (A popular rendering of the poem in preparation.)

C. *Critical works, monographs, and other papers.*

1870. C. H. Pearson. Unsigned article in North British Review of April, on "Contemporary Literature, No. 18," reviewing Skeat's edition of 1869.

1874. Emil Bernard. William Langland; a Grammatical Treatise.

1877. F. Rosenthal. Die Alliterierende Englische Langzeile im xiv. Jahrhundert.

1879. J. J. Jusserand. Observations sur la Vision de Piers Plowman, a propos des

"Notes to text A, B, and C," du Rev. W. W. Skeat.

1885. Richard Kron. William Langley's Buch von Peter dem Pfueger.

1887. Athenaeum, March 19. Unsigned review of Skeat's three-text (1885) edition.

1887. Wilhelm Wandschneider. Zur Syntax des Verbes in Langley's Vision of William.

1887. Eduard Teichmann. Die Verbalflexion in William Langley's Buch von Peter dem Pfueger.

1889. Ernst Guenther. Englisches Leben im Vierzehnten Jahrhundert.

1890. Ludwig Klapprott. Das Ende in W. Langland's Buch von Peter dem Pfueger.

1894. J. J. Jusserand. Piers Plowman; a Contribution to the history of English Mysticism.

1894. E. M. Hopkins. Character and Opinions of William Langland.

1895. Elizabeth Deering Hanscom. The Argument of the Vision of Piers Plowman.

1895. E. M. Hopkins. Education of William Langland. (Princeton College Bulletin, April.)

1897. A. A. Jack. The Autobiographical Elements in Piers Plowman. (Paper read before the Central Division of the Modern Language Association.)

the attention it has received, is the question as to the author's name. The details of his life are fully as uncertain; but are obtained from what is apparently his own statement and there is little difference of opinion about them; while the amount of his work is so limited, under twenty thousand lines as against nearly forty-five thousand of Chaucer's, and his style and method are so distinct, that there is scarcely an opportunity to question the authorship of any part of it as the work of others is so often questioned.

But as to his name, a mere glance at the titles of the **Author's name.** various monographs devoted to a study of the poem will show that here at least, there is open divergence of opinion. It may indeed be a slight divergence quantitatively considered, but it has a history that is somewhat extended and not altogether devoid of interest; and it is the history of this divergence that this paper proposes to trace.

If there were no other evidence bearing upon this subject than that to be obtained from the poem itself, which is of course the **Evidence of poem.** highest and oldest authority, the name would doubtless have received much less attention, but would nevertheless remain undetermined. The poem contains no formal or direct reference whatever to the poet's surname, but invariably speaks of him as Will (Wil or Wille). This seems conclusive proof that his first name was William; but it must at the same time be remembered that the poem is allegorical throughout, and that every character in it, with apparently but two or three exceptions, is allegorical or invented to correspond with existing types; and the character names likewise. The principal exceptions are the names of the author himself, his wife and his daughter; and while not much doubt has been expressed of the authenticity of these names and the characters described under them, there is yet room for doubt, because, if these are authentic, he has in these few instances reversed his usual practice.

However, the scribes who multiplied copies of the **Copyists.** several versions of his poem might be supposed to know something of the matter, and these agreed in calling him William, if they made occasion to mention him by name. *Hic incipit Visio Willelmi de Petro Plouhman*, they wrote; and, *Hic explicit visio Willelmi de Petro Plouhman*; and, *Incipit visio ejusdem Willelmi de Dowel*. All titles and colophons which mention the author agree in this; but it is noticeable that the MSS. of the B-text, one of which (Laud Misc. 581, Bodleian Library) was very possibly the author's own autograph copy, contain fewer of these

extratextual references to him. It is also possible that all the copyists knew about the matter was derived from the text itself.

Occasionally a copyist, or more probably the owner, of a manuscript added a note concerning the author; but very few manuscripts containing such notes have been discovered, and apparently only one of them was known before printed editions began to appear. If so, that one may have been the cause of beginning the long-continued discussion. For in the first printed edition, **Crowley, 1550.** that of Crowley, 1550, the editor makes this brief deliverance, which in view of the direct statements in the text, is surprising. It is found at the beginning of his address to the reader:

"Beynge desyerous to knowe the name of the Autoure of this most worthy worke (gentle reader) and the tyme of the writynge of the same: I did not onely gather togyther suche aunciente copies as I could come by, but also consult such men as I knew to be more exercised in the studie of antiquities, then I my selfe haue been. And by some of them I haue learned that the Autour was named Roberte langelande, a Shropshire man borne in Cleybirie, about viii. myles from Maluerne hilles."

Crowley, then, obtained this information not from a manuscript but from some one "exercised in the study of antiquities." Who this person may have been appears in 1559. In that **Bale, 1559.** year John Bale published his *Scriptorum Illustrium majoris Britanniae*; and in his catalogue of illustrious writers was included the name of Robert Langland. His statement, in translation, is in substance as follows:

Robert Langland, a priest as it appears, was born in Shropshire in a village commonly called Cleobury Mortimer, in the clay land eight miles from the Malvern hills. I may not state with certainty whether in that rustic and retired place he became in maturity versed in letters, or whether he may not have studied at Oxford or Cambridge, since among the masters in those places learning especially flourished. Yet this is clearly agreed upon, that he was one of the first disciples of John Wyclif, and in a spiritual fervor against the open blasphemies of papists against God and his Christ, under delightful colors and types he issued in the English speech a noble work, worthy the perusal of all good men, which he called the Vision of Piers Plowman. . . . Nothing else written by him have I known. In this work, under various and pleasant similitudes, he has made many prophecies which we have seen fulfilled in our times. He finished his work in the year 1369, when John Chichester was mayor of London.

Undoubtedly John Bale was sufficiently "exercised in the study of antiquities" to answer to Crowley's description; but the question still remains: If Crowley's information came from Bale, from what source did Bale obtain his? Was it from record, tradition, or conjecture? Only a hint at the answer to the question has been obtained, and that relates to a very small part of Bale's statement.

Ashburnham
MS. 130.

In the course of time it became known that inside the cover of Ashburnham MS. 130 there is a record to this effect:

"Robertus Langlande, natus in comitatu Salopie in villa Mortimers Clybery in the Clayland and within viij miles of Malvern hills, scripsit piers ploughman."

The handwriting of this note was recognized as that of Bale; but later still, it was found that immediately above this entry, in a much older handwriting and so placed that Bale's note had to be crowded in below it, was written, "Robert or william langland made pers ploughman;" a two-sided statement which may nevertheless, be Bale's authority for naming the poet *Robert* Langland. But if this was his authority for the name, still nothing is known as to the source from which he obtained the rest of his information. Part of it, that the poet was a Wycliffite, seems to be incorrect; but that part is not stated as matter of positive knowledge, and it seems as though Bale's entire account might have been based upon tradition.

In 1577, Holinshed, in his *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, refers to Bale and quotes his words, "Robert Langland, a secular priest, born in Salopshire, in Mortimers Cliburie." In

1580 something new appears. Another chronicler, Stow, 1580. John Stow, in his *Annales* makes this entry:*

"This year, 1342, Iohn Maluerne, Fellow of Oriol Colledge, in Oxford, made and finished his booke, entituled the Visions of Pierce Plowman."

This is another surprise, and another search for the source of the information is in order; a search that has hitherto been and is likely to be in vain. The date mentioned, 1342, has been proved wrong; but it has been found that a John Malverne, who was probably an Oxford man, lived contemporary with the author of the poem, and this and the reference in the poem to the Malvern hills may have been made by Stow the basis of a conjecture.

In a short time, in 1586, formal record is made of a pure blunder, a blunder of which Crowley himself was guilty in an unguarded moment,† and which is often repeated by those not familiar with the poem. It is set down by W. Webbe, who in the *Discourse of English Poetrie*, is of the opinion that the ancient poet is himself named Piers Plowman, "a very pithy wryter." It is easy to make this mistake, since the poem is often mentioned as the *Vision of Piers Plowman*; but the full title corrects it as easily. Puttenham (1589) does not make it; but F. Meres in a *Comparative*

*See Skeat, 1884, p. 867. Most of the accompanying citations are from this volume.

†In his abstract of Passus VIII, B-text. (Skeat, 1886, lxxvi, note.)

Discourse of our English Poets, printed in 1598, goes considerably further, and not only asserts that the author of the poem was Piers Plowman, but seems to imply that Piers Plowman was of Immanuel College, Cambridge.

Other chroniclers. By this time, chroniclers begin to discover that there are discrepant statements as to the matter under discussion, and there are some half-amusing attempts to reconcile them by placing them side by side, or as it were allowing them to face one another down. Selden (1613), in a note to song 7 of Drayton's *Polyolbion*, says that the Vision of Piers Plowman is done, as is thought, by Robert Langland, a Shropshire man; but that he has read that its author was John Malvern of Oriel College, Oxford. J. Pits (1619)* accepts John Malvern, and says what was perhaps true of the real John Malvern, that he was a Benedictine monk at Worcester. J. Weever, in *Ancient Funeral Monuments*, edition of 1631, takes the other side, following Bale. David Buchanan, in a manuscript, *Schrift de Scriptoribus Scotis*, written perhaps at about the year 1645, also calls the poet Robert Langland, but is willing to have him a Benedictine monk, which up to this point it is the province of John Malvern alone to be, and makes a new departure by calling him a Scotchman of Aberdeen; thinking, perhaps, that in the general confusion this statement is as likely as any to be accepted, and a poet gained for Scotland. And then follows the most heroic attempt of all to set matters right; that of Anthony Wood, *Historia et Antiquitates Universitatis Oxoniensis*, 1674, who makes the poet John Malvern, of Oriel College, then a Benedictine of Worcester, known also by the name Robert Langland; "Robertus de Langland, Johan. Malverne nonnullis appellatur."

So the changes are rung, while an occasional writer reiterates that Piers Plowman is the author, as for example, Dr. Hickes, *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus*, 1705. On the whole, however, the tide set in favor of the name Robert Langland. That the attention given the question had not been in any sense critical, the fact that the name William is not once suggested by any one of the chroniclers clearly demonstrates; they have simply copied from one another or have had recourse to guessing, without looking at the text itself.

Tyrwhitt, 1778. But a more critical age is approaching, and it is a pleasure to turn from the chroniclers to learn the opinion of such

**Relationum Historicarum de Rebus Anglicis* (Skeat, 1884, p. 869).

a scholar as Thomas Tyrwhitt, who is disinclined to follow any of them. In a note to the essay prefatory to his edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1778),* he says

"The Visions of (i. e. concerning) Pierce Plowman are generally ascribed to one Robert Langland, but the best MSS. that I have seen make the Christian name of the author William, without mentioning his surname. So in MS. Cotton, Vesp. B. XVI, at the end of p. 1, is this rubric, 'Hic incipit secundus passus de visione Willelmi de Petro Plouhman.' And in Ver. 5 of p. 2, instead of 'And sayde: Sonne, slepest thou?' the MS. has 'And sayde: Wille, slepest thou?'"

Whitaker, 1813. The second important edition of *Piers Plowman* is that of Thomas Dunham Whitaker. He is content to accept Crowley's opinion that the author of the poem is "Robert Langland, a Secular Priest of the county of Salop." But at the same time he gives the title of the poem, not as the *Vision of Pierce Plowman*, after Crowley, but in full as the *Visio Willi de Petro Plouhman, Item Visiones ejusdem de Dowel, Dobet, et Dobest*; and having noted that there are differences of opinion as to the poet's name, he simply dismisses the matter with the statement, "Wherever born and bred and by whatever name distinguished, the author of these Visions was an observer and a reflector of no common powers." He infers that he must have been similar in character to "his own visionary William," but does not draw the inference that the poet and his "visionary William" are the same. Invariably he calls the poet Langland, and believes him to have been an inhabitant of some of the Midland counties, because he finds in his style "vestiges of the dialect which was originally formed upon the Mercno-Saxon."

**MS. Dublin,
D. 4, 1.**

Up to this point no new evidence had been discovered since the beginning of the discussion, but just as the little on hand was becoming almost threadbare, Sir Frederick Madden found something new, and possibly more authentic than anything known up to that time. This was a note, in a handwriting of the fifteenth century, in a manuscript in the library of Trinity College, Dublin (MS. Dublin, D. 4, 1); which may be thus translated:

Memorandum that Stacy de Rokayle was the father of William of Langland, that he was well born (generosus), and lived in Shipton-under-Wychwood, holding of Lord le Spenser in Oxfordshire, and that the aforesaid William made a book which is called *Piers Plowman*.

Here is evidence tending to discredit everything that has pre-

*Citation made from edition of 1798, by Mr. V. Lansing Collins, Reference Librarian of Princeton University, who has furnished also citations from Whitaker's and Wright's editions of *Piers Plowman*.

ceded except a single word of Bale's, and the note just above Bale's in the Ashburnham MS. 130; a note probably not yet known to exist. But this evidence the next editor of the **Wright, 1842.** poem, Thomas Wright, is disinclined to accept. He says in substance that a tradition as old as the 16th century, the grounds of which are unknown, asserts that the author was named Robert Longlande or Langlande, that he was born at Cleobury Mortimer in Shropshire, was educated at Oxford, and became a monk at Malvern. In this he accepts Bale's statement and Bale's conjecture, or possibly takes a hint from Stow. He does not agree with Tyrwhitt that "Wil" is an abbreviation of William and that it is the author's name; but believes instead that Will, his wife and his daughter, are all alike "visionary." He mentions the discovery made by Madden, and cites in full the note in the Dublin MS., but thinks that this should not overthrow the old tradition until Stacy de Rokayle is traced out. He also quotes in full the statement of Buchanan.

Thus after three hundred years, a scholar familiar with all the data still holds to the opinion expressed by Crowley, the first editor. In all that time, there has been scarcely any one to believe that the Will of the poem is really William the author; the majority assuming that Will, and of course his wife and his daughter also, are invented or allegorical characters, like Wit, Study, Clergy, and Piers Plowman himself; and that the real author is named Robert Langland.

**Skeat,
1866-1886.**

Wright's second edition of the poem was published in 1856. Interest in the work grew so great that one of the first of living English scholars decided to give to it the time necessary to collect all discoverable manuscripts and to make a complete edition; a task that required more than twenty years for completion. In 1866 the Early English Text Society published for W. W. Skeat extracts from twenty-nine MSS. known at that date, and called for information concerning others. In the next year was

A-text, 1867.

published the first of Skeat's many volumes, containing the A-text. In this he tentatively advances the opinion that the author of the poem was named not Robert but William Langland. Discarding Stow's John Malvern as a mere guess, he says, "That his surname was Langland . . . seems to be generally agreed;" and he prefers William to Robert, Bale to the contrary notwithstanding, on the evidence of the note in the Dublin MS. and of the use of the name in the text itself. "The phrase 'oure Wille' is exactly the colloquial way of speaking of a

friend or relation which may be heard any day in Shropshire still . . . and it seems to me utterly unlikely that a man would use a feigned name whilst he was speaking of himself in so familiar a manner. Hence the balance of evidence seems to me in favor of the name William Langland."

It may be noted that the preceding editor thought the very same evidence to balance very differently. But as his work advances, Professor Skeat finds new evidence. Before the

B-text, 1869.

B-text appeared in 1869, he had found in the Ashburnham MS. the note written above Bale's and previously overlooked, to the effect that the author was named Robert *or* William. In this edition he says that this note is of the fifteenth century. In a later edition (1886) he calls it simply an *old* note, and in a still later edition (1893) an *early* one: a change of phrase which seems to indicate uncertainty as to its actual age, although as it must for reasons already stated be older than Bale's note (see p. 5), its exact age would seem to be immaterial. This note, as it does not exclude the name William, is regarded by Skeat as confirming his view; and he finds further a way of accounting for the name Robert as an error in reading one line of the text (Skeat, 1869, p. xxviii, footnote). In one MS. (201 Corpus Christi College, Oxford) there is one line (B. viii, 1) in which the word which appears as *yrobed* in other manuscripts is written *y-Robt* with a stroke through the *b*. When so written, the line might be read or misread—

"And y, Robert, in russet, gan rome a-bowhte;"

instead of as in other manuscripts—

"Thus yrobed in russet I romed aboute."

This is certainly ingenious if not convincing.

At this stage in the discussion an entirely new direction is given to it by an unsigned article in the North British Review of

Pearson, 1870.

April, 1870,* written by Professor C. H. Pearson, reviewing Skeat's volume of the preceding year, and constituting a most important contribution to the literature of the subject. In substance, this article is as follows:

There have been three theories as to the authorship of the poem, "excluding Buchanan's arbitrary statement that the author was a Scot brought up in Aberdeen." The first, that of Stow, is overthrown by Skeat, who shows that the poem is of later date, and has no necessary connection with Oxford. The second is based on the 15th century note in the Ashburnham MS. followed by Bale and Crowley; Bale neglecting the name William given as an alternative for Robert,

*Citations made in part by Mr. F. N. Raymond of Columbia University.

and adding that the author was from Shropshire. The third is that based upon the 15th century note in the Dublin MS. Skeat accepts the last, but apparently without clear reason,

An investigation of the records of Oxfordshire and Shropshire ought to throw some light on the matter. In the Dublin MS. are mentioned the names Langland, Rokayle, and Stacy. Records show that there was a Langland family in the southwestern counties of Somerset, Dorset, and Devon,* but there is no trace of such a name in Oxfordshire or Shropshire. The name Rokayle, in variant forms, is more common. As Rokesle it is familiar in Sussex, Surrey, Kent, and London. In Shropshire there is a hamlet called Ruckley or Rokele, and associated with it as part of the manor of Acton Burnel, another named, not Langland, but Langley or Langel; and the name Burnel de Langley was sometimes given to the younger members of the Burnel family. There were still other Langleys, not members of the Burnel family, but engaged in its service. Seemingly there were two families, one of Langley and one of Rokesle, living in adjoining hamlets, and attached to the same manor; the Rokesles having been earlier connected with the service of the Mortimers, one of whom was lord of Cleobury Mortimer. In the Langley family the Christian name Stacia occurs in 1259.

There is also a hamlet named Langley in the parish of Shipton-under-Wychwood in Oxfordshire; and a family of Langleys lived for nearly two centuries in that county, were wardens of Wychwood, and owned land in Shipton-under-Wychwood. Another Langley family, of Warwickshire, received land in Oxfordshire under Edward I.

These facts, in connection with the statement of Bale and that of the Dublin MS. note, suggest that possibly the poet was named not Langland but Langley. However, he could hardly have been a Burnel de Langley, for the Burnel family of Acton Burnel became extinct in 1377. He could not have been an Oxfordshire Langley, for the last member bearing the name died in 1362. He could not have been a Warwickshire Langley, for that family is well known, and was not in any way connected with the counties of Oxford and Salop in the 14th century.

There remains to be considered only the Langleys who were tenants of the Burnels; and since this family is associated with the Rokesles, who in turn are connected with the village of Cleobury Mortimer, there seems to be here a clue to the statement that the poet's father was named Rokayle, and that the poet was born at Cleobury Mortimer. Moreover it is probable that members of this family of Langleys removed from Shropshire to Shipton-under-Wychwood. For a member of the Burnel family to which both Langleys and Rokesles were attached, married the daughter of one Hugh de Despenser,† and a Hugh de Despenser died in 1349, seized of the manor of Shipton-under-Wychwood. If one of the Burnels went to Oxfordshire, some of the attendant Langleys doubtless went also. The conclusion is possible that the poet's father was named Stacy de Langley, a name known in the family; that he removed to Oxfordshire from Shropshire, and in so doing took the name of the neighboring village of Rokele "to avoid confusion with the knightly family which, as we have seen, held land in Shipton-under-Wychwood."

It would be equally possible that the poet's father was of the Rokele family, and this would lend a shade more of plausibility to

*There is a village named Langland in Somersetshire and another named Langland in Lancashire (Skeat, 1884, xxiv, note).

†Lord le Spenser; see note of Dublin MS., p. 7.

the poet's birth at Cleobury Mortimer. Rokeles, or Rokesles, were as likely to go with a Burnel to Wychwood as were Langleys. In that case the poet might have been named for either Langley village, and such a naming would have been by no means unusual. It is this view of the facts stated by Pearson that Skeat is inclined to take.

But Professor Pearson's presentation of the case **Skeat, Text C, 1873.** for Langley instead of Langland as the poet's name is so convincing that, for the time at least, Professor Skeat is inclined to accept it without reservation; the more readily that his confidence in the name Langland is further temporarily shaken by a discovery of his own, that in three MSS. of the C-text* the copyist has named the author William W.: "Explicit visio Willelmi. W. de Petro le Plowman." Of this Skeat can offer no interpretation beyond this comment:

"The signification of this mystic 'W' is still to seek. Professor Morley suggests 'Wychwood,' in allusion to the note in the Dublin MS. . . . My own guess is 'Wigorniensis,' from the connection between Great Malvern and the see of Worcester. But I fear that both guesses are wide of the mark."

At least twice afterwards, Skeat expressed the opinion that Langley was probably the poet's name. In Ward's English Poets, (1880), in the article on Piers Plowman, written by him, he states that the poet's name "should rather perhaps be read as Langley;" and in an article in the ninth edition of the Cyclopaedia Britannica,† though the heading is Langland, he says, "It would seem that Langland should rather be Langley."

Meanwhile, in 1874, there had appeared Bernard's **Bernard, 1874.** grammatical treatise upon the poem, which, so far as the author's name is concerned, merely accepts the view earlier expressed by Skeat, and shows that the writer knew nothing of Pearson's article. Bernard says, in part:

"The best and most trustworthy evidence that we have for supposing his Christian name to be William is that in nearly all the MSS. he is so designated; although in Crowley's edition, A. D. 1550, we meet with an interesting address to the Reader, in which the editor calls our poet '*Roberte langelande*' . . . He is also named *Robertus Langelande* by Bale. David Buchanan also calls him *Robertus Langland*. But as these testimonies are proved to be erroneous in other respects also, viz. in Bale's taking it for granted that he was a monk, when we have several evidences to convince us of the contrary; further in Buchanan's claiming him as a Scotchman, and in Crowley's uncertainty as to dates and distances, we prefer to adopt the universally received belief that our author's Christian name was *William*, the more so as he always alludes to himself as 'Wille' in his poems. * * * That his surname was *Langland* is ascertained

*Ilchester, Douce 104, and Digby 102. See Skeat, 1873, p. xxxvii.

†Publication begun in 1875.

by the following passage from the Dublin MS.* *Memorandum quod Stacy de Rokayle, pater Willielmi de Langland, qui Stacius fuit generosus et morabatur in Schiptone under Whicwode, tenens domini le Spenser in comitatu Oxon., qui praedictus Willielmus fecit librum qui vocatur Perys Ploughman.* Yet upon the whole the balance of evidence inclines in favor of *William Langland*—and as such has been generally received.

The probable place of his birth was Cleobury Mortimer in Shropshire, which is not far from the 'Shipton-under-Wychwood' mentioned by Bale."

This is chiefly interesting because of the artlessness with which the writer repeats the statements of Skeat with some minor blunders of his own; entirely unaware that in the meantime Skeat had changed his mind.

But Professor Skeat did not long remain a convert to Pearson's theory. He continued his investigations, reediting his school text in 1874 and in 1879, issuing the first part of his *Skeat, 1884.* "Notes" on the poem in 1877, and the second part including a general preface in 1884. In this general preface his discussion of the entire question of name and birthplace is exhaustive, and since that time little or nothing has been added to the data which he there adduces. The result of all is that he returns to his original position that the poet's name was William Langland, while admitting that the position is not so strong as it might be.

He strengthens his original argument from the poem itself by showing that one line of the B-text (B, xv, 148) contains what may very possibly be a riddle upon the author's full name—

"I haue lyved in londe, quod I my name is longe wille;"

though the suggestion that this possibly means *Wille Longelonde* is made only in a footnote (1884, p. xxvi). He points out that Crowley's information as to the name and birthplace of the author is probably obtained from Bale, and that the chroniclers have in general merely copied from these two. He accounts for Stow's naming the poet John Malvern by the theory that Stow might have associated the mention in the poem of the Malvern hills with the fact that there was a John Malvern living at about the time of the author, as shown by three quoted references; one to a John de Malverne, prior of Worcester in 1395; one to John Malvern who wrote a continuation of Higden's *Polychronicon*; and one to a John Malvern who was present at the examination of a W. Thorpe in 1407. Such a man might of course very easily have been a "fellow of Orial Colledge, in Oxford."

*See page 7.

Dismissing Buchanan, as before, without argument, he repeats the suggestion that the name Robert may have arisen from a misreading of the text (p. 9 preceding). As to the surname, he has no further explanation to offer of the "mystic W," noting only that it is found in MSS. of the latest text. He then states fully Professor Pearson's theory, noting that it was improbable that the poet belonged to the Langleys of Wychwood, as he was probably not of so good a family, but admitting that he might have belonged to the Shropshire family which presumably removed to Oxfordshire and took service with the Despensers, and that he might have been named Langley from either the hamlet in Shropshire or that in Oxfordshire. Notwithstanding, Skeat now holds to his own view that the surname is Langland, because he does not see how otherwise it could have been substituted for Langley, since Langland is so rare and Langley so common. He notes finally that the manors of Malvern and Wychwood were at one time in the hands of the same lord, a Despenser; a fact which does not of course affect the disputed name, but which may be interpreted as furnishing an additional reason why the poet may have been connected with both Oxfordshire and Shropshire. Practically, then, as the final result of his deliberations, Skeat accepts in full what is perhaps the oldest record, that in the Dublin MS., supplementing it by Bale's statement that the poet was born at Cleobury Mortimer.

In the preface to the three-text edition of the poem Skeat, latest opinion in 1886, he added nothing to this statement; but in a later edition of the students' text first published in 1869, he calls attention to the fact that London records of the fourteenth century contain the name Langley and apparently not that of Langland. He quotes two excerpts, one relating to a butcher, and the other to one who was, apparently, a church official (capellanus) and at the same time a property-holder. The second of these was named Robert Langley, and thus is suggested the speculation that perhaps the poet had a brother Robert who helped him in the composition of the poem; whence the tradition that "Robert or William" made Piers Plowman. But despite everything, while stating that every theory presents difficulties which he is unable to explain, and tacitly admitting that Langley is more probable and best harmonizes the conflicting evidence, Professor Skeat cherishes his faith in the surname Langland.

This closes the case, so far as the presentation of evidence is concerned, and so far as Professor Skeat, the principal witness, is concerned; and what remains is of the nature of special pleading

Kron, 1885. by successive advocates. In 1885, Dr. Richard Kron published an admirable monograph, based on direct examination of the manuscripts of the poem, and dealing with their comparative ages and degrees of authenticity, the probable dialect of the author, and the general distinctions between the texts. In the last chapter he gives a complete survey of the case relating to the author's name, and concludes that it is not Langland but Langley. Following is a summary of his argument:

As to the first name of the poet, John and Robert must be rejected in favor of William for two reasons; first because the MS. titles give William, and second because the poet always calls himself Will. Further, two manuscripts (Ashburnham and Dublin) have marginal notes in which the name William appears. Ritson suggests that in the poem "wille" does not stand for the poet's name but for the will psychological: a theory untenable in view of the fact that in several MSS. William is written in the very places where others have "wille."*

In three MSS. of the latest text is written William W. instead of William. Skeat guesses that this W may stand for Wigorniensis; Morley that it stands for Wychwood.

The surname is written Langelande, Longlond, Langlond, Langland, and Malvern. [Here are quoted Bale, the Ashburnham and Dublin MSS., Stow, Wood, and Holinshed.] The note in the Ashburnham MS. is more trustworthy than that of Bale directly below it. Stow says that the poem was finished in 1342, and that the author was John Malvern; but as he was wrong in the date, he may easily have been wrong in the name also. Five of six chroniclers agree that the name was Langland, but they show themselves more or less unreliable, and the statements of one are often based upon those of another.

The records of the Midland counties, especially of Shropshire, show no trace of the name Langland, while Langley is common. The investigations of Pearson have led him to conclude that the poet's father was named Langley, but that he changed his name to Rokayle on removing from Shropshire to Oxfordshire. His son, perhaps born at Cleobury Mortimer, was probably called William de Rokayle until he took up his residence in London, when he resumed his real name, William (de) Langley. In London at that time are found Langleys but no Langlands. Pearson's theory that Langley was the poet's name is supported by contemporary records, while Langland rests only upon the somewhat uncertain tradition of the next century. Until, therefore, the name Langland is substantiated by better authority than yet exists, Langley is to be given the preference.

In reply to Skeat's suggestion that the poet might have had a brother Robert who helped him in his work, Kron says that the unity of the work, and the uniform high level (*Dichtergroesse*) of its style, make such an assumption impossible.

Kron's position as to the surname would seem to be that which would necessarily be taken by all students of the question, in view of Pearson's argument and Skeat's reluctant admission that, although he doesn't believe in it himself, Langley is the more probable. But

*No examples are cited in support of this statement.

this is not by any means the case. On the contrary, the weight of later opinion, or rather of usage, follows Skeat and prefers Langland.

A reviewer of Skeat's three-text (1886) edition of the poem, in the *Athenaeum* of March 19, 1887, says that while Skeat is probably right in rejecting Pearson's conclusion, that conclusion follows almost necessarily from the premises which Skeat admitted; and it is implied that the premises should be rejected also. After stating the more important facts demonstrated by Pearson, he adds—

"A man who in the fourteenth century bore a local surname different from that of his father would almost certainly derive it from his own birthplace or early place of residence; so that if we adopt the statement that the author of 'Piers Plowman' was the son of Stacy de Rokayle, the presumption becomes strong that his surname was really Langley, from the hamlet so called in Shipton. On the other hand, however, all tradition is in favor of the form Langland, which appears even in the MS. note on which the contrary theory is based. On the whole, the probability seems to be that Stacy de Rokayle had a son named William Langley, and that the writer of the note wrongly identified this person with the famous poet, whom, notwithstanding, he correctly designates as Langland. This view seems to be absolutely required if we are to accept the traditional form of the name; but if it be correct, Prof. Skeat's statements as to the poet's parentage have no longer any foundation."

The discussion is next taken up by J. J. Jusserand, 1894, in his *Piers Plowman, a Contribution to the History of English Mysticism*. In his chapter on the subject, as well as in the *Athenaeum* article, it is possible to find amusement as well as instruction, so novel are the applications made of the wellworn facts. He also takes the position that the poet's name was Langland:*

"His Christian name was William, as is attested by the title of several manuscripts, . . . moreover, the personages of his Visions, when they speak to him, always address him as William. . . . His surname appears to have been Langland (or Longland which is a different form of the same). Tradition is in favor of this name, and tradition is represented, firstly, in the XVth century, by annotations inscribed in some manuscripts by ancient possessors of them; and secondly, in the XVIth century, by John Bale. In his 'Catalogue of illustrious writers,' Bale affirms that 'Langelande' composed the 'Visionem Petri Aratoris, commencing: 'In aestivo tempore, cum sol caleret,' which is indeed the beginning of our poem:

In a somer sesun' whon softe was the sonne;
thirdly, there happens to be in a line of the Visions a succession of words which, put together, give, in a reversed order, the name of William Langland:

I have lyved in *londe*. quod I' my name is *longe Wille*.

It seems likely that that this is more than a mere accident; the poets of that time liked to play upon names, and often gave theirs to be divined in easy enigmas."

*Jusserand, *Piers Plowman*, Chap. III, p. 59.

M. Jusserand places more stress upon this third point than Skeat does; and quotes two illustrations. Of Pearson's argument in favor of the name Langley, he says—

"Tradition is opposed to this hypothesis, and the name is not to be found in any manuscript. He grounds his theory principally on a note in the handwriting of the XVth century, inscribed in a manuscript of the Visions preserved at Dublin. * * * According to this note, the author of *Piers Plowman* was the son of a sort of franklin or freeholder, a dependent of the family of Spenser, living at Shipton-under-Wychwood, in the county of Oxford. Mr. Pearson says that no family of the name of Langland has left any trace in the vicinity, but Langleys are there known, and there is a hamlet of that name. If, as is the case, Stacy's son did not take the name of his father, he must have adopted that of his village, and called himself Langley, after the locality.

"Everything in this theory is hypothesis, and tradition contradicts it. Concerning the man himself, the very note of the Dublin manuscript gives the name of Langland; concerning the village, no evidence connects the poet with a village of Langley. One only authority, that we might, it is true, wish weightier and more ancient, but which is better than nothing, mentions the place where our visionary is supposed to have been born. [Bale's statement follows].

"'Langley' remains, therefore, a pure hypothesis; and, for a hypothesis to be resorted to instead of tradition, it would at least have been necessary to find tradition supplying data irreconcilable with facts known for certain to be true; but this is not the case. Tradition supplies us with 'Langland' as being the poet's name, and 'Clebury Mortimer' as his birthplace; the fact of the poet receiving his name, though it be that of a locality, without having been born there, can be easily explained. Places of this name exist in several counties of England (Somerset, Devon, Dorset), and various ties—that of habitation, &c.—may have bound him to one of them, and been the cause of this surname. Cases of this kind were frequent in the Middle Ages. . . . If, therefore, 'Langley' is a possibility, 'Langland' is also a possibility, and one that is corroborated by tradition."

M. Jusserand is not, however, inclined to accept absolutely the authority of the Dublin MS. in all matters. He explains that in that note, "generosus" means "a kind of personage," of good family, a gentleman; and that Langland, if of such a parentage, would have had a social rank which he certainly did not possess, if, as is assumed by almost all students of the poem, the Will of the poem is the man who wrote it.

Recent opinions. The discussion still rests practically where M. Jusserand left it. In 1895, Miss Kate M. Warren, in a published translation of a part of the B-text, calls the poet Langland, and states that custom and tradition have tended to fix the name in this form, but that the question is not finally settled. Mr. J. F. Davis, editor of part of the B-text, 1896, summarizing the discussion briefly, adds another to the examples cited by Jusserand in support of the opinion that the poet intended to record his name in a line of the poem (B, xv, 148), and concludes:

"In the absence of more definite evidence there is no reason, therefore, for rejecting the traditional surname."

In 1887, Professor A. E. Jack is inclined to doubt the evidence of the poem itself, not only as touching the author's name, but as to all the supposed autobiographical elements therein; taking the position that the existence of such elements can neither be affirmed nor denied. He points out that all the earlier editors of the poem call the author Robert, notwithstanding titles and internal evidence; and that Wright dissents openly from the opinion that "the name 'Wil' given in the poem to the dreamer necessarily shows that the writer's name was William; and still less that the mention of 'Kytte my wyf' and 'Kalote my daughter' and of the dreamer's having resided at Cornhill, refer to the family and residence of the author of the poem." Morley, while accepting William as the author, doubts the genuineness of the names of wife and daughter, a doubt in which Skeat was once inclined to share. But a doubt of the genuineness of any of these names, and of other elements in the poem commonly accepted as autobiographical but shown by Professor Jack to be uncertain, involves the doubt that Will is the author's name, and tends to demonstrate that no assumption can be made touching either Christian name or surname.

In *Modern English Literature* (1898), Mr. Edmund Gosse says of the poet, "There is little doubt that his name was William Langland (or William Langley)." Professor Brandl also is content to accept the common view.

Miss Warren's statement accurately describes the situation; custom and tradition favor the name William Langland, but the question is not finally settled. Just how it is to be settled, unless new manuscript evidence comes to light, does not appear. At present it is easier to prove that nothing whatever is known about the name than to show that any name is a probable one; and the deflections or personal equations in the arguments of those who have tried to reach a definite conclusion are often easy to discover. Before attempting to point out any of them, it may be well to glance in review at some of the propositions that have been enunciated.

**Resume of
speculations
and theories.**

1. The author's name was Piers Plowman, once, at least, conjectured to be of Immanuel College, Cambridge.

This blunder is not too preposterous to be often made even yet by those who know the poem only in a general way; but it requires

no refutation. Piers Plowman is a character in the poem no more suggesting the author than do a hundred others, all evidently allegorical; and certainly Piers Plowman is not a college man, whatever the author of the poem may have been.

2. The author was John Malvern, of Oriel College, Oxford.

Skeat's objection to this proposition is fairly conclusive. There evidently was a John Malvern, of some scholarship, contemporary with the author of the poem. Stow, not taking the trouble to consult any authority now known, asserted that this man wrote the poem and finished it in 1342. The latter statement has been positively disproved; the former is thereby weakened, and is not authoritative in any particular, although often repeated.

3. The author was a Scotchman from Aberdeen (named Robert Langland).

A statement by an unreliable writer, at a date too late to have any weight whatever, contrary to the internal evidence of the poem and to all other evidence except itself. Scarcely any one has thought it worth a denial.

4. The author (sometimes called John Malvern) was of Worcester.

If he was John Malvern, that he was of Worcester is matter of record, since John Malvern was prior of Worcester in 1395. If the author was not John Malvern he might still at some time have been of Worcester, for Worcester is not far from the Malvern hills and the Shropshire village in which the poet is supposed to have been born. And if he was not of Worcester, he might have been so called by those who associated him with the name Malvern, which belongs to a Worcestershire village as well as to the Malvern hills. Upon this point there has been no discussion, beyond the suggestion by Skeat that the "W." after the poet's name in certain MSS. may stand for Wigorniensis; but it is possible, and perhaps even probable that the poet was in a certain sense "of Worcester."

5. The author's name was Robert.

This name is earliest mentioned in a manuscript note which is generally accepted as of the fifteenth century, although Skeat has withdrawn his positive statement to that effect; but in that note it is given as an alternative for William. Bale and Crowley accepted the Robert and ignored the William, and were followed by many others till Skeat took the matter up, showing that William is more probable, and suggesting that the name Robert might have originated in a misreading of a line of the text, or that the poet might have had a brother Robert.

6. The author's name was William.

This view is supported by the text itself, by manuscript titles, by a manuscript note of the fifteenth century, and is held by the great majority of later commentators. The statements of the poem have been doubted and are still doubtful, as shown by Professor Jack; but the name is the accepted one.

7. The author's surname was Langland.

The proposition is based on the two fifteenth century notes, the statement of Bale, and the doubtful evidence of one line in the poem itself. It is not confirmed by other internal evidence, or by manuscript titles or subscriptions; but it was not called in question till 1870. Since that time it has been generally regarded as doubtful, although commonly used.

8. The author's surname was Langley.

The theory advanced by Professor Pearson in 1870, based entirely on fourteenth century records which show that, tradition apart, Langley is more probable than Langland, and more easily reconcilable with other matters commonly accepted as facts. Langland rests on uncertain and comparatively late tradition; Langley on contemporary and authenticated records. To account for the existence of the name Langley is easy; to account for Langland is less so. Both names lack conclusive proof.

As to the poet's birth at Cleobury Mortimer and residence at Shipton-under-Wychwood, no exception has been taken. Pearson shows that, judging from records, both may easily be true. Internal evidence supports the first while not tending in any way to controvert the other.

Surely so extended a discussion of what is apparently so small a matter never yielded less in the way of definite results; and it seems hardly possible that identical data could be made by different examiners to justify such opposite conclusions. In such a discussion the burden of proof may well be ignored; and often it seems that too much of assumption has characterized the arguments, and especially those in favor of the name William Langland. As a matter of convenience it is of course right to regard precedent until precedent is shown to be wrong, and to call the poet William Langland, if that be precedent; but to assume that precedent is proof is not convincing.

Some arguments reexamined. The discussion of Bernard (p. 11), for example, wears an air of independence, but is in fact a carelessly made copy of that of Skeat. He rejects the testimony of Bale, Crowley, and Buchanan as touching the name Bernard.

Robert, because they are all guilty of making erroneous or uncertain statements about other matters. He then finds one remaining authority favoring the name Langland, and two favoring something else represented by a *W*; and concludes that the "balance of evidence" favors Langland. But this it does not do unless Bale, Crowley, and the rest are readmitted to the place which he has denied them.

Skeat. Professor Skeat makes no unwarranted assumptions of any kind, and reaches no positive conclusion. He bases his final opinion upon the direct statements of the text, not as to the author's name alone, but as to many other matters touching the author; and upon the fact that he can assign no reason why the poet should have been called William Langland if that was not actually his name. As to the first point recent discussion shows that it is not certain that the text can be directly depended upon; as to the second it is true that there is only the barest conjecture to account for the name William Langland if it is not the true one.

Pearson. Professor Pearson's induction is based upon a formidable array of records, and leads to a hypothesis which reconciles all the facts he has discovered with commonly received opinion except as to the name Langland. He makes it possible to account for that name as simply a mistake for the similar name Langley. While all this is probability and not proof, nothing has yet been discovered to weaken his argument except the one line in the poem which possibly contains a riddle upon the name Langland; and it still has to be met in some way by all who take an opposed position.

Kron. Dr. Kron finds himself compelled to agree with Pearson, on the ground that, as between tradition and records, especially when records are contemporary with the facts in question and tradition is not, the records have the advantage. This would be true if no middle position were possible, since the evidence of tradition is in this case scarcely more direct than that of the records, and since, if tradition and records contradict one another, tradition must give away. But the point of direct contradiction is not reached, and it is at least conceivable, although it may not be probable, that both tradition and record are in part authentic, relating to different individuals. Dr. Kron neglects to suggest how the name Langland might have originated if it is not the true one. He makes as to one minor point a misleading statement, saying that in some texts William is written where

Wille occurs in others. If this were true of the text proper, it would be of importance; but no citations are given, and the statement apparently is an error, or else refers to titles and subscriptions, and not to the body of the text.

Athenaeum, The writer of the *Athenaeum* article seeks for the middle way out of the dilemma by speculating that there were two persons—a William Langley, son of Stacy de Rokayle; and a William Langland of unknown parentage, the author of *Piers Plowman*—and that the writer of the Dublin MS. note confused their names. Unless this view be correct, the *Athenaeum* writer thinks it impossible to accept the name Langland. No especial objection can be made to this statement; but before the speculation can itself be accepted, it is necessary to account for what would follow from it: that a famous man named Langland was born and lived the greater part of his life where Langleys abounded, but where there is no trace in any official record of his own family name.

Jusserand. M. Jusserand's presentation of the case is more positive, perhaps dangerously so. He believes that the poet's Christian name was William, among other reasons because, he says, the personages of his visions always address him by that name. But, as it happens, they never call him William but always Will; and the distinction has come to be of some importance.

He has no doubt that the surname is Langland, because "everything in this (Langley) theory is hypothesis, and tradition contradicts it." Yet the hypothesis has something to rest upon, and the tradition has nothing except that line of the poem which contains an inversion of the poet's name; and this is doubtful corroboration, although it might be made stronger than Jusserand makes it. He objects that Langley does not appear in any manuscript. But, excepting in the very notes that are in question, neither does Langland. He says that if hypothesis is to be accepted instead of tradition, it is "necessary to find tradition supplying data irreconcilable with facts known for certain to be true; but this is not the case." And yet tradition, including Bale and the note in the Dublin MS. does make statements which have not been accepted, and which are even specifically rejected by Jusserand himself because they are "irreconcilable" with things that are at least believed to be true.

He says that no evidence connects the poet with a village of Langley. Nevertheless evidence brings him into the immediate

neighborhood of such villages; and among this is internal evidence that is independent of either hypothesis or tradition and of the direct statements made in the text. On the other side, there is no evidence to connect him with a village of Langland, but only the speculation made by Jusserand that he might at some time have been connected with Somersetshire or Devonshire or Dorsetshire or Lancashire by any one of "various ties," as for example "habitation;" and it is as easy to suppose that he was called Langland by mistake by some belated annotator, or that he assumed the name himself, for a purpose.

It does not seem, therefore, that Jusserand has really disturbed the adjustment of the two sides of the argument. On the contrary, if there is any choice between a hypothesis with plenty of records behind it and traditions which have no corroboration, are self-contradictory, and which in fact support the hypothesis in all points save the one at issue, the advantage would seem to be with the hypothesis. Or, to put it another way, since the traditions are such that they have not been fully accepted by any one, it would seem that the parts accepted should be those that have some direct confirmation.

Instead of establishing definite results, the preceding examination seems rather to demonstrate that from existing data almost any conclusion may be drawn to suit the taste; and in that event there is nothing to hinder the drawing of a new conclusion. Some of the grounds upon which such a conclusion might be based are as follows:

Possible
grounds
for a new
hypothesis.

1. The poet's name is not certainly known to have been William.

A tendency is now showing itself to doubt the evidence of the text itself, hitherto regarded as unquestionable, and to regard the name and the details therein stated as purely allegorical; especially as the author represents his Will as doing many things which he himself most strongly condemns. Jusserand accepts this inconsistency, while Professor Jack accounts for it as a half-humorous interpolation, and believes that if the author had been such a man as he represents himself to be, he could hardly have written the poem.

But if we doubt the direct statement of the text, the evidence of the titles is also doubtful, since they may be founded upon the text; and that of the two manuscript notes also becomes doubtful, for the same reason. Where Willam and Langland are found together, the argument against Langland to some extent discredits

William also; while even if Langland be accepted, it is still not necessary to accept William, since one of the manuscript notes offers the alternative of Robert, and since it has not been demonstrated that Will may not, after all, have had at least a remote connection with the "psychological" will as suggested by Ritson.*

2. The poet's name was not certainly Langland.

The evidence on this point has been presented; but, further, it is possible to account for the name Langland on the supposition that it was not the poet's real name. It is indeed barely possible that it might have been inferred by some student or copyist from the single line in the poem, in which, perhaps by chance, occurred the syllables now quoted as evidence; and this as easily as the name Robert might have been inferred, as suggested by Skeat, from a misreading of a line. The misreading of *Robert* for *robed* probably could have occurred only in connection with a single manuscript; while the line in which the name Langland is by design or accident buried, is found in several manuscripts. It might possibly have been a name assumed by the author, the more so if William was an assumed name; for taking as he did a position at variance with that of authorities in church and state, he might have desired to conceal his identity and evade responsibility. And it might have been merely a mistake of tradition for the name Langley, resembling it so closely. It may be added that the "mystic 'W'" does not stand for Langland, or for a place where Langlands were known; but it does possibly stand for localities in which there were numerous Langleys.

3. The name of the poet was possibly Robert.

If it was not William, it is of course more likely to have been Robert than anything else, since there is tradition to that effect. The chance of its having originated in a misreading of the text is a more minute one than that Langland so originated; and if it did not so originate, it is more difficult to account for on any other theory than that it was the actual name.

4. The poet's name was probably Langley.

To accept the name Langley makes it possible to harmonize the internal and external evidence as to all other points; while to accept the name Langland destroys the force of the traditions as to the poet's birthplace, themselves in harmony with internal evidence. To assume that there were two men leaves the difficulty unsolved.

*See argument of Kron, pp. 14 and 20.

5. The poet may have had a motive for concealing his name and identity.

He took a position in reference to religious and political matters that while popular with the mass of the people may not have been so popular with those in authority. Professor Jack shows that he was not widely known in London, and suggests that after all perhaps he did not live there; but it is easy to suppose that he did not wish to be widely known in London as the author of the poem, and took steps to that end.

6. The poet was not necessarily of the humble origin commonly ascribed to him on the evidence of direct assertions in the text.

If the character of Will is merely assumed or symbolical, then all that is said of him becomes symbolical, and we may then suppose whatever we please of the author that will not negative his interest in the deeper problems of the life of his time, and his opportunity of familiarizing himself with those problems by the study of that life. While not too well educated—his college training and even his spelling have been called in question—he knew something of law, more of books, and most of the church; and these things are consonant with a higher position than that usually assigned him. This makes more plausible the tradition that his father was of good family. He might therefore have been of a middle class, of serious disposition, and with leisure to look about him; or perhaps in more humble but comfortable circumstances. Doubting the assertions of the text, and remembering that these are not to be confused with a truer internal evidence to which reference has been made—evidence derived from the spirit and setting of the poem—we may reason that he was not necessarily poor; and that the leisure that he undoubtedly possessed was not the leisure of idleness or laziness. Doubting those assertions, we are no longer compelled to give him a wife and a daughter, and to keep him in the lower orders of the church. In short, he might have been serious, a devout churchman, familiar with country life and London life of the middle and lower classes, without being poor, shiftless, or married. If he was not poor, his father might have been “generous” after all; and if he was not married, Bale’s statement that he was a priest needs no qualification; though it still seems probable that he belonged to the secular or parochial class.

7. A corollary already suggested is that the poet was not necessarily the hypocrite we might assume him to be if we accept him as the “visionary William” who lived by practices which he himself

condemns as wrong. We have now only to assume that he gave his Will this character to illustrate a peculiar weakness of human nature; a weakness which we may conclude on a better sort of internal evidence than direct assertion to have been foreign to the real character of the poet. It is certain that when we are no longer required to identify the poet with Will, we instinctively place him upon a still higher plane; and the respect which we already feel for him is greatly increased.

Name possibly Robert Langley. A possible conclusion, apparently reconciling as many of the discrepancies and uncertainties as any other can, is this: That the author of *Piers Plowman* was a member of a lower or middle class, familiar with London, holding office in the church, serious, devout, perhaps in good circumstances, not of broad education, but yet a reading man. That he gave the name Will to himself in the poem, possibly because it was his real name, perhaps because he wished to conceal his real name, probably because it happened to suggest itself at the right time. That perhaps for a similar reason he assumed the name Langland and introduced it into the poem in a riddle; or more probably that he did not know that it is in the poem, and that its presence there is a mere chance. That his real name was neither William nor Langland, but that he was willing that that name should pass current, whether or not such had been his intention. That his Christian name was Robert, and that, known to a few only, and apparently contradicted by the text of the poem, it barely found its way to record, and after so long a time that it had come to be regarded as uncertain by one of those who set it down. That his surname was Langley; but that it was not known; or else that it was known, but in the course of a hundred years or so suffered an unhappy phonetic fate, came to be understood as Langland and was recorded as Langland. That it is highly probable that in course of time a Bacon-Shakespeare cipher can be invented to prove this hypothesis absolutely true, and to tell in detail the whole story as here outlined. That perhaps the improbable William Langland who was possibly William Langley or Robert Langland, but probably Robert Langley, was the very Robert Langley who was living in London up to about 1395, of whom it is written—"Robertus Langeleye, alias Robertus Parterick, capellanus, London," was owner of "unum messuag' et quatuor shope in Les Flessshambles in Parochia Sancti Nicholai, unum tenementum in parochia Sancti Nicholai in Veteri Piscaria, et redditus de 6s. exeunt' de quodam tenemento in Staninglane in parochia Beatae Marie" (*Inquis. post*

Mortem, ii, 90, 194; quoted in Skeat, 1893, xvii).

But if hypothesis-building is easy, so too is hypothesis unbuilding. That a Robert Langley was a "capellanus," which probably means a church official, and lived at the right time is plausible and encouraging, notwithstanding the unpoetic nature of his possessions; but the difficulty now is that this Robert Langley did not die at the right time. If the author of *Piers Plowman* was also the author of *Richard the Redeless*, as is fairly demonstrable, he lived at least until 1399; while the source from which the preceding quotation is made is such as to indicate that the Robert Langley therein named was already deceased in 1395. This one defective brick is enough to endanger our entire structure; unless, having gone so far, we venture one thing more, and assume that perhaps late in life there developed in the poet, supposed to be Robert Langley, a new phase of religious feeling, under the influence of which, resolving upon a life of greater asceticism, he settled his affairs, gave up all his property for record and disposal, and so died to the world and buried himself in the church in a distant city; and that this and not his actual death is the cause of the record.

But, even if such an assumption were not altogether unwarrantable, it is not worth while to continue this long-extended quest since it must after all end where it began, in speculation; for it is suggested that with a little additional speculation one might almost as easily make out a case for the not quite forgotten John Malvern as the unknown poet. It is certain that he was an ecclesiastic, and that he lived at the right time and very nearly in the right place. All that can be demonstrated is, as already stated, that upon such evidence as is known an investigator can base practically any opinion that he will.

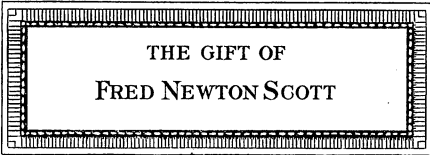
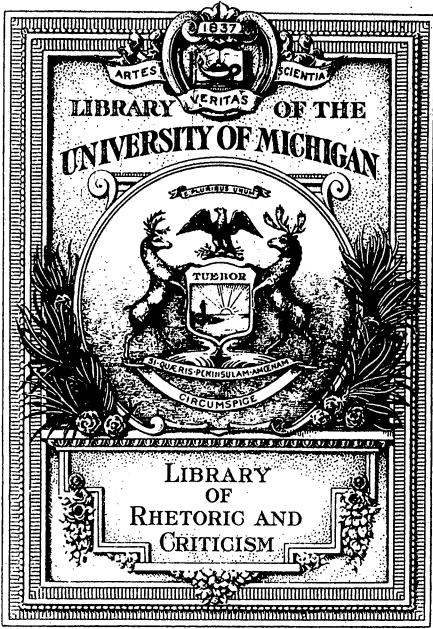
It is not proved that the author of the Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman was named William. It seems likely that he was named Langley, but that is not proved either. Then, since he himself is chiefly responsible for the William, and it may be for the Langland also, and since that name is as convenient as any, we may as well assume that in calling him William Langland we are not only respecting tradition but perhaps his wishes also, and are therefore paying due honor to his memory.

Traditional name convenient.

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